Example of research paper on back to blaxploitation

Sociology, Feminism

The 1960s and 1970s were two of the most challenging and the most turbulent decades in America, not only in its history, but also in its film industry. These were times when the social and political turmoil, along with the demise of the Motion Picture Production Code, resulted in the rise of Exploitation films. This type of cinema is applied to most low-budget genre movies that refer to or exploit contemporary social anxieties. Ernest Mathijs states, "[o]stensibly, Exploitation films claim to warn viewers about the consequences of these problems, but in most cases their style, narrative, and inferences celebrate (or " exploit") the problems as much as critiquing it." Exploitation films rely heavily on sensational and salacious topics; therefore, no subject is too risky or sordid. Numerous small subcategories operate within the broad heading of Exploitation film, many of which usually are defined by the topic they exploit. The most significant film genre that " has become almost synonymous of Exploitation in the 1970s" is Blaxploitation (McGowan-Hartmann). Considered a cultural film explosion, with over one hundred films released by major and independent studios, Blaxploitation films tout African-American characters and often contain urban subplot elements that address their experience. Its successful formula grapples with complex issues of violence against oppressive mainstream society, feminism, hypersexuality and racial identity. The scenarios depicted in Blaxploitation films reflect the position of African Americans during a time when many people were involved in changes that led to the Civil Rights Movement, the 2nd Wave Feminist Movement, and many others. In these films, the black community focuses on issues of racial oppression, economic destitution, emasculation and drug addiction in their post-Civil Rights

neighborhoods, while women still suffer from being subject to men being threatened by their potentially increased agency and power.

One significant source of visual imagery and representation for black nationality and pride is in the 'blaxploitation' (a portmanteau of 'black' and 'exploitation') genre of cinema. In the 1960s and 1970s, blaxploitation films came into popularity - these films were often trashy, low budget crime films that dealt with 'The Black Community' (as famously credited in the Melvin Van Peebles film Sweet Sweetback's Baadaassss Song), employing women in many of the principal roles. One famous blaxploitation actress is Pam Grier, who made a living playing sassy, detective-crimefighter characters like Foxy Brown and Coffy in their eponymous films. In some ways, these characterizations managed to elevate the status of black women and their portrayal in popular culture; no longer were black women helpless, incapable, or incompetent. They were attractive, strong-willed, sassy women who knew how to take care of themselves (Sims, p. 102). Many female blaxploitation heroes, including Coffy and Foxy Brown, wielded their feminine power while still wearing revealing, sexy clothing, acting as sex symbols while maintaining aggressive and powerful defenses of themselves within their community.

Blaxploitation films focused not only on black feminist narratives, but masculine black narratives as well. In the blaxploitation films of Richard Roundtree, Melvin Van Peebles, Fred Williamson and more, the black hero of the film was equal parts ladies' man, community leader, social justice crusader and avenging angel. These characters often had a shaky relationship with the police; either they were reluctant and constantly

challenging members of the police force (Shaft), former police officers who were called back in to solve problems in their community (Disco Godfather, Black Belt Jones) or completely alienated from the police force (Sweet Sweetback's Baadaassss Song). This echoes the relationship blacks had with the white authority in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement - police officers were typically thought of as " The Man," and their unique history of 'keeping the black man down' kept them at arm's length from the plot in these films. White men were usually either antagonists or helpless incompetents who needed the blaxploitation hero to save the day.

Violence against mainstream society was often an undercurrent of this particular genre of films. The setting of blaxploitation films is typically the ghetto; the hero typically stands up for a fractured, impoverished and drug-addled community in an attempt to free their communities from drugs, often provided by the white community or an unscrupulous element of the black community (Seifert 2). In one of the most famous blaxploitation films of all time, the 1972 film Super Fly, Youngblood Priest, cocaine dealer and overall action hero, is an unrepentant drug dealer at the beginning of the film. The events of the film revolve around his attempts to get out of the drug business and make enough money to provide for himself. Priest is both an example of a strong black character and a cautionary tale for young blacks to not get into the drug business - he attempts to get out of the business despite everyone else telling him not to. This interaction provides ample subtext for Priest as representative of the black youth of the era, being told he has no higher aspiration than the drug and gang lifestyle. With Super Fly, the heroic part of Youngblood Priest comes not from his stylized violence and

victory over his foes, but the need to escape the very real problems of drug abuse and crime.

One of the most significant and prominent aspects of all of these hypersexualized male blaxploitation heroes is their sexual prowess; every single one is, as Shaft is blatantly called, " a sex machine with all the chicks," and their skills in pleasuring their sexual conquests is mentioned early and often in these films. Sweet Sweetback, for example, is given this moniker because of his unusually large member; the first scene in his film is of him as a young child impressing a prostitute during the losing of his virginity, and then he grows up to become a worker in a sex show of his own. These images perpetuate the status of the black man as a virile sexual being, the implication being that he is a better lover than white men. Due to the social emasculation of black men due to segregation, these figures were meant to be inspirational - Sweetback, John Shaft and others reclaimed their masculinity through their confidence and sexual abilities. Many blaxploitation films feature as a staple the scene of the hero's suede-covered love nest, complete with large bed and sultry music, with at least one nude woman by his side under the covers . This set dressing offers a suggestion of opulence and satisfaction on the part of the woman, which then contributes to the hero's personification as an avatar for sexual pleasure.

In light of the impact of blaxploitation films as a genre, the racial identity of African-Americans became much more community oriented - the subtext of these films is often about the hero as an avatar, fighting for the sake of the community against " angel dust" or some other drug/gang element ruining the bright futures of the young kids in the community. At the same time, the

hyperstylized clothing, music and lifestyles of the characters in blaxploitation films also contributed to stereotyping of black people, and played into these stereotypes as they continued. To that end, blaxploitation remains a sword of Damocles of racial empowerment - these films allowed African-Americans to gain prominent heroes and role models, while also exploiting the more alienating and cartoonish aspects of black culture to create and perpetuate stereotypes (Guerrero, 2012).

Where this hypersexuality, in particular, comes into play in relation to the effects of the Civil Rights Movement is in these films' roles in perpetuating the stereotype of the promiscuous black man. Instead of strengthening ideals of family and household, blaxploitation films are often correlated with an increase in rates of illegitimacy, divorce and single-mother households in black communities (Russell 123). As a result, while blaxploitation films served to normalize black sexuality in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, it also harmed the potential for the " pathological" black family to arise, as black men felt the need to exert these hypermasculine traits of promiscuity and sexual conquest aped by these blaxploitation heroes (Russell 123). This follows along with the blaxploitation genre's status as a double-edged sword for progressiveness - these films feature confident, assured and actualized heroes who reclaim whatever attributes that were oppressed before the Civil Rights Movement by reclaiming masculinity, but it swings too far in that direction to create stable black homes and communities.

The blaxploitation genre, as previously mentioned, was equally empowering to women as well - in the predominantly male genre of action films,

blaxploitation offered women the chance to take on some of those attributes of strength and confidence. Women were given action hero roles which both masculinize them and empower their own femininity - these were figures who could actually fight back against potential rapists and drug dealers in their neighborhood, actualizing women (particularly black women) in a way they had heretofore been denied. This ties in with post-feminist and second-wave ideals of women being able to take control of their own sexuality and identity, without the need for a domineering male figure to control them. From a racial perspective, this feminism ignores the issues of white versus black, focusing instead on rallying the black female community to do the same as the Foxy Browns of the blaxploitation world: " Postfeminism envisions a world where racial difference is reconciled without dialogue – where the only issue preventing racial harmony is women of color's refusal to work their (girl) power" (Stasia 246). Through this outlook, blaxploitation embraced the second-wave feminist ideal of a powerful black woman who combined the ability to defend herself and show strength, while also able to assert her femininity (Dawn, 2008).

That being said, there are still some inherent problems with the blaxploitation genre, particularly from a feminist viewpoint; namely, that these characters exist solely in a black-occupied world. In these films, the white man is typically the villain, and Foxy Brown or another character is presented as the black crusader who will fight to get their town back, or get revenge on the death of a loved one. While this is typical of most action films, it can be argued that this type of character can create another stereotype - that of the overly pushy, aggressive, confrontational black

woman who is suspicious or distrustful of men. This image is a strange combination of the Jezebel and thug missus stereotypes, where the men in blaxploitation films are " ineffectual." Therefore, she is not a figure that promotes equality and cooperation with her fellow man (black or white), but a restrictive, man-hating woman who does not permit equal discourse to be shared (Seifert 3).

On the side of the blaxploitation film, the defiance of the women heralded as heroes in those films should be admired to a small extent; however, the cultural portrayals often go so far as to make them teeter toward misandry. While the sight of Foxy Brown as a strong, independent woman is also good, this independence is cultivated in a seething hatred and distrust of men, likely as a consequence of the injustices performed on her and black women like her. This also sends a poor message to young black girls, as it will teach them to distrust men and remain suspicious of them, robbing them of their ability to relate on equal footing with men. Black cultural producers, despite wanting to provide women with aggressive and proactive figures, keep them firmly entrenched in the ghetto, equating violence and aggression with strength of character. Furthermore, these images are simply part of the new misogyny inherent in popular culture; the fetishizing of black women as the 'other' is part of the appeal of the Foxy Browns and Cleopatra Joneses of the blaxploitation genre.

Even with these powerful depictions of black women, the blaxploitation genre still largely showed them in supporting roles - that of the love interest, the inquisitive reporter who awakens the town to a drug menace (e. g. Disco Godfather), or the kung-fu sidekick who still merely assists the male main

character (e. g. Black Belt Jones). Furthermore, there was a decided lack of actual girl-to-girl camaraderie and friendship found in even female-centric blaxploitation films - " Foxy, Cleopatra, and Coffy work alone, and in almost every case rely on men for aid [and] support" (Seifert 6). With that in mind, these films become less and less of a case study for strong women in films as they are a novelty - the rare woman who can hold her own in a fight, and thus becomes more sexually desirable to men as a result.

In conclusion, the blaxploitation genre has a complex relationship with both the Civil Rights Movement and second-wave feminism . While these films presented archetypal, heroic figures who stood up to continually oppressive racial and economic forces, permitting black men and women to reclaim their sexuality and agency, they also took great strides toward destabilizing the black home and somewhat derailing moves toward gender equality among black women. The male blaxploitation hero was a philandering sex machine, promiscuous and aggressive, who reclaimed black masculinity at the expense of creating stable homes and dual-parent households. Meanwhile, women blaxploitation heroes most often fought for their communities with the exclusive help of men, singling these heroes out as anomalies to be respected but not considered part of the normal pantheon of women's figures. Furthermore, these women fought for their rights as blacks before their rights as women, thus emphasizing the racial element of equal rights to the detriment of women's rights and feminism.

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